

SREE NARAYANA GURU: LIFE AND MISSION

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Chapter II

SREE NARAYANA GURU: LIFE AND MISSION

Sree Narayana Guru is regarded as one of the greatest renaissance leaders in Kerala whose sway was unique during the last century of the second Millennium. He is one among the few who stood as a light house in the context of the moral ethos of the age. He was a saint, poet, philosopher and mystic who lived during the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. According to some scholars the Guru Narayana is a social reformer, who caused a social revolution unparalleled in the history of Kerala. Some are inclined to regard him as saint in the Advaita tradition of the modern period. Some others extracted the poetic gems in the works of Guru. He was all these and much more.

Sree Narayana Guru is reverently adored as 'the Guru'. Sukumar Azhikode has quite rightly said, "Sree Narayana was Guru in the real conventional sense of the term. The Guru simply is. He does by what he is. He speaks or thinks by what he is. All the powers and faculties in him are in perfect harmony in evolving a totally integrated personality. Nothing in him is alien to his deepest essence."¹

¹ Sukumar Azhikode, "Sree Narayana and his Mission in Kerala", *Maha Samadhi Mandir of Narayana Guru Prathima Pratishtha Celebration Souvenir – 1967*. (Varkala : Gurukulam, 1967) p. 11

Swami Dharmatheerth sums up his own calculated view in his *Menace of Hindu Imperialism*, " India has produced no better teacher, no bolder reformer, no holier saint, and above all, no greater nation builder than Sree Narayana Gurudev of Kerala. His life, work and teachings have a refreshing uniqueness combined with naturalness, and a sublime simplicity tinged with mystery which render them particularly interesting and profoundly instructive to students of Hindu Nationalism, to whom they offer ideals and methods of realising them which none else has so clearly and successfully demonstrated in recent centuries."²

"The Guru is a beacon light to the prospects of peace, brotherhood, harmony and duty. This 'jñānin of action' hailing from downtrodden and dispossessed segment of society, taught about the unitive nature of Being and Becoming. The Guru's teachings are in essence a reinterpretation, nay, a dynamic extension of the wisdom and heritage of our ancient land."³ Narayana Guru was a great spiritual leader and he used his spiritual attainment for the creation of a new man and a new social and religious order. He was a great savant and seer, a truly *Jeevan Mukta* or *Karma Yogi*, totally detached from desires and ambitions and yet ever active in the task he had set before him.

Narayana Guru was born during India's darkest days of British reign and when Indian culture was at its most decadent condition. The

² K. Sreenivasan, *Sree Narayana Guru*. (Trivandrum: Jayasree Publications, 1989) p. 2

³ *ibid.*, p. 2

majority of the Keralites followed the Dravidian practices of worship. The Aryan culture was introduced into Kerala by immigrant Brahmins from the North and Brahminism reached its zenith by this time. The Brahmins consecrated temples of Aryan Gods throughout Kerala and kept the society completely under their control. The temples had become the live centres of Brahminic activity, and bases for enslavement of the natives and perpetuation of Brahminic domination. All the people except the rulers were strictly kept away from temples. The so called divine law of '*Varṇa*' was misused *to achieve this objective and the Brahmins came to be regarded as super-human beings even by the rulers.* Thus the caste system, which was based upon '*avarṇas*' and '*savarṇas*'-established a social inferiority and superiority-;new customs and practices like untouchability and unapproachability were introduced, and society began to disintegrate fast. Thus the society of Kerala degenerated into a 'lunatic asylum' as stated by Swamy Vivekananda. It was at this time of misery that the Guru was born as the one destined to bring hope and consolation, a harbinger of freedom and self respect. He was a kindly friend of mankind who saved many from the tangles of pernicious habits and choking diehard prejudices.

2.1 LIFE HISTORY

2.1.1 Childhood and Education

Narayana Guru was born on 20th August 1854 at Vayalvaram House in Chempazhanthy, a village ten miles north of Trivandrum. His

name was Narayanan and he was called by his parents as Nanu. His father Madan Asan was a farmer belonging to the Ezava community. He was also an Asan or village school master. Nanu's mother Kutty Amma was a pious woman of gentle disposition. Nanu had two sisters. His uncle Krishnan Vaidyar was an Ayurvedic physician of considerable repute. The small mud-walled hut where he was born is now protected as a historic monument.

Religion as well as devotion came naturally to him even from his early childhood as he followed the footsteps of his elders who worshipped regularly at the Bhagavathy temple of Manackal adjacent to Nanu's ancestral home .He was brought up in a hard, independent, realistic and work-oriented environment.

Nanu had his early education in Malayalam and Sanskrit under the guidance of Chempalanti Pillai and completed this in 1872. Then he was sent to Varanapally for further study under a distinguished Sanskrit scholar Kummampilli Raman Pillai Asan who helped him to become an eminent scholar in Malayalam and Sanskrit. He mastered the great Indian Epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharatha. Because his quick grasp of meaning, extreme ease in memorising and tenacious memory induced his teacher to accelerate the pace of teaching and elevate him as the monitor or *chattampi* of the school. There he got enough solitude and also opportunities for meditation unhindered by the cares and worries of the seething world out side. Meandering among verdurous

fields Nanu used to pluck the leaves of trees and plants, taste them, chew them and even swallow the juice. These experiments in diet provided him with expert knowledge about the edibility or otherwise of forest plants. Later on this knowledge stood him in good stead when chose to live as a mendicant in jungle. This short period was an important interlude before the hard trials ahead. It was during this period that he girded up his loins for the slow struggle for self- discovery and unitive understanding, which he attained during the crucial years which followed. His higher studies in Sanskrit was over in 1879.

2.1.2 Sadhaka Life

Like his father, Nanu took to teaching at Kadakkavoor and Anchuthengu and thus became Nanu Asan. During this period he lead the life of recluse and spent most of his time in the precincts of the temple, expounding philosophy and explaining to people moral and spiritual values. It was a period of deep meditation and musing; and he wrote devotional poems and hymns. Śiva was his *Ista Devatha*

“Oh! God I am not eager to attain that beauty

Where thou and I merge into one.

All paths, even those other than that of Śiva

Are all in the ultimate sense paths to Śiva.”⁴

⁴ Moorkoth Kunhappa, *Sree Narayana Guru*. (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1982) p. 10

In this stage of his life “we see him taking refuge in Śiva as the saviour from the trammels of the flesh.”⁵

“Śiva, Siva, there is none equal to thee

Knowing all this,

Still am I straying

Among puzzling thoughts that

lead me, to what?”⁶

In 1882, Nanu Asan's parents decided to marry him to one of his cousins and his sister married her and brought home as that was a familiar practice in those days. But Nanu Asan told the bride that “All are born with some purpose in their lives. I have mine and you have yours. Let me go to fulfil my role.”⁷ And he went out in to the world at large as did all saints who were eager to understand the secrets of life, cutting himself away from the bonds of worldly pleasure. Then he spent his time in a Tamil book shop reading books like *Thirukkural*, *Tirumantiram*, *Tiruppukal*, *Tiruppaval*, *Vedānta Jñānavatil Kattilai*, *Ozhivil Otukkam*, *Śivapuraṇam* etc. There he visited the scholarly home of Perunally Krishnan Vaidyar, a scholar - poet from where he browsed over a rare collection of philosophical texts in Sanskrit and Tamil. During this period of spiritual regimentation and quest, Nanu Swamy came across Kunjan Pillai (Shanmugha Das) known as Chattampi Swamikal and Velutheri

⁵ ibid., p. 10

⁶ ibid., p. 11

⁷ Nitya Chaitanya Yati, *Sree Narayana Guru*. (Sreenivasapuram: East West University of Brahmavidya, 1994) p. 6

Kesavan Vaidyar. Both were conversant with Tamil Classics and Saivite Philosophy. Chattampi Swamikal condemned the strange -hold of the Brahmin priests on the people and attacked the caste system as their devilish design. His book *Vedādhikara Nirūpanam* (Critique of the Vedic Interpretation) is an attack on Brahminical maneuvering and sacerdotal arrogance. He also attacked Christianity and warned against the increasing pace of conversion to that alien faith. Chattampi Swamikal introduced Nanu Swamy to Thaikkatt Ayyaavu, a Tamilian- a great adept in Hata Yoga. Yoga lessons increased his thirst for realization and this ultimately led him to Pillathadam on the crest of the mountains known as Maruthva malai in Kanyakumari- a district of Tamil Nadu- to do intense penance for six years. During this period he prayed to God, conceiving the Supreme to be Siva and he believed that the God-heads like Devi, Subrahmanya and Vinayaka were only different appellations for the same unitive Godhood.

2.1.3 Knower Life

During these days of rigorous penance done in total seclusion, absolutely cut off from the outside world, the Guru achieved liberation or self knowledge. Just as Siddhartha was awakened under the Bodhi tree of Gaya and became Gautama Buddha, Nanu Asan was also got enlightened in the cave Marutva and became Sree Narayana Guru'. In *Ātmōpadeśa Śatakam* Guru speaks of his realization in poignant words:

"If an arid desert most expansive should become over flooded
 By river water all at once, such would be the rising symphony
 Falling into the ears, to open then the eye; do therefore
 Daily become the best of sages endowed with self control."⁸

Bhagavadgītā also explains how is one to attain to this state:

"Let the Yogin try constantly to concentrate his mind (on the supreme self) remaining in solitude and alone, self controlled, free from desires and (longing for) possessions."⁹ "Serene and fearless, firm in the vow of celibacy, subdued in mind, let him sit, harmonized, his mind turned to Me and intent on Me alone."¹⁰

After his realization he became a recluse in a thick forest on the banks of the river Neyyar in Aruvippuram. One young boy called Parameswaran Pillai happened to see Narayana Guru in the forest and through him the world outside came to know of the presence of a yogi at Aruvippuram. The Guru prescribed, to the afflicted, simple Ayurvedic remedies and incurable illness vanished. Many such effective treatments were part of his family heritage. He had a wide knowledge of medicinal herbs abounding in those days in the country side. The trial brought many people to the Guru.

⁸ Nataraja Guru, *Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru*. (Sreenivasapuram, India: East-West University Publication, 1990) p. 519

⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgītā*. (Bombay: Blackie and Son (India) Ltd., 1970) p. 192

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 197

2.i.4 Revolutionary Saint

Caste system was the greatest blot on Hinduism at that time. There was not only untouchability and unapproachability but even unseeability also. 'Even the public roads freely used by cattle and dogs were prohibited to the so-called depressed caste people'. Thus a large section of the population suffered misery and slavery. And in utter servitude and slavish mentality, they sent their offerings to the temples where they were not allowed to enter and where they were denied the right to worship God.

Caste was the deciding factor in every aspect of social life. Society at that time was segmented and stratified on the basis of caste. Brahmins were the dominant sect and enjoyed every privilege and respect. Only a Brahmin was entitled to perform the installation of an idol. The Guru challenged the orthodoxy and vindicated the right of every man to worship God in his own right. He performed the sacred act of the installation of idol at Aruvipuram in 1888. And he continued his act of revolution through-out his life. As he wanted to bring blessings of peace and harmony to the suffering million and to give a practical orientation to the truth that he had learned, he decided to become an itinerant sanyasin.^{*} He began to converse with the people gathered around him and became one of the pathmakers who blaze the trail that other men follow, as explained by the *Gītā*,

“Whatsoever a great man does, the same is done by others as well. Whatever standard he sets the world follows.”¹¹

The Guru never opposed or denied anything openly. At the time of the installation of the idol at Aruvipuram the Guru wrote a verse which said:

‘This is a model abode where all men shall
live as brothers without caste distinctions
or religious rivalries’.

After that act of great landmark, a social and religious transformation took place in Kerala.

2.II LIFE MISSION

Narayana Guru considered the aim of his life as the upliftment of the downtrodden classes of Kerala. He believed that only through religion and education they could get correct perspective about good life. He used to visit each and every hut within his reach and explained the necessity of cleanliness, education and co-operation among the people. Like Socrates, he explained to them his views in simple language. He used inductive arguments for clarifying concepts and ideas. The Guru wanted all sections of the society to get at least elementary education. He tried to abolish untouchability through the diffusion of knowledge and insisting upon the necessity of cleanliness. He rightly believed that

¹¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 140

education has the all important role in the progress of the society itself. One of the inspiring exhortions of the Guru was 'Educate to be free, Organize to be strong and Thrive through industry'. Needless to say that this slogan had great appeal in the then existing social situation in Kerala though this showed a rational perspective, which agree with all time. According to the Guru the ultimate aim of education should be the spiritual self- realization. To this end he had also said 'Education will be meaningless if it does not make one respect the noble feet of a holy man who has attained real knowledge'.

For creating enlightenment, he knew that the immediate thrust was to be on religion and he reformed its practice by reorganizing and reconstructing temples as centres of intellectual life. They were to be arenas of genuine understanding, brotherliness and harmony. The way in which he accomplished this goal threw light on the quality of his vision. The kinds and forms of *prathishta* he undertook, reveal it. They showed the quality of his world view and the validity of his stance as a religious philosopher.

Narayana Guru never stood for any community. The central aim of Guru's philosophy was just the abolition of the error that makes for caste thinking by means of religion. The Guru's teaching was the deliverance of man from ignorance at the spiritual level. He has composed a number of devotional verses which are a mixture of high metaphysical conceptions with humble prayers addressed to God.

Daivadaśakam is such a typical prayer composed by the Guru for the use of the children who used to gather in Sivagiri everyday for devotions.

2.III SOURCES OF GURU'S PHILOSOPHY.

Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru derives its main inspiration from the Upanishads and Vedas. Guru's works give importance to spiritual illumination. They reveal to us a world more of rich and varied spiritual experience than of abstract philosophical categories. Their truths are verified not only by logical reasons but by personal experience. Guru's aim is practical rather than speculative. Knowledge is a means to freedom and Brahma-Vidya is the pursuit of wisdom by a way of life.

According to Nataraja Guru, the great disciple of the Guru, the Guru was a direct successor of Sankara. "The best authority we have in thinking so is the Guru's own words- 'What we have to say is what Sankara said'"¹² or as Nataraja Guru puts it with reference to the particular needs of the age of reason, "Narayana Guru has been able to state the gist of ancient Indian Wisdom tradition in a manner lending itself to be integratively understood in a unified fashion."¹³

Guru Narayana represents the Advaita tradition in a fully revalued and restated form. Nataraja Guru stated that "In the Guru Narayana, the

¹² Nataraja Guru, *Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru*. (Sreenivasapuram: East West University of Brahmavidya, 1990) p. 61

¹³ Nitya Chaitanya Yati, *The Psychology of Darśanamālā*. (Varkala: Gurukula Publishing House, 1987) p. 3

same Advaita Vedānta is treated with a freshness often startlingly unique and simple, taking into its scope and purview, more consciously and wakefully, not merely subjective idealistic varieties, but also all those secondary implications that Vedānta has, or can have, bearing on such human topics as equality and justice.”¹⁴ Among the three Vedāntic revelators, (ancient Sree Vyasa, Sree Sankara and Narayana Guru) Narayana Guru should be considered the most important to the present era.

In Ātmōpadeśa Śatakam the Guru uses the classical vedāntic example- Waves on the sea are homogeneous with the ocean- to refer to the differences between the cause and the effect in the phenomenal world:

“These phenomenal aspects five such as the sky
Which as emergent from outside is here seen to be,
By contemplation one should bring to non-difference
As the sea is to the waves that rise in rows thereon.”¹⁵

The Guru forged and amplified his vision to make it serve the needs of life, to be felt and apprehended in its baffling complexity by the common man. Thus he made his philosophy serve the needs of social and religious changes.

Narayana Guru bases his teachings also on *Bhagavadgītā* and South Indian *Śaivism* which goes under many names such as *Śaiva*

¹⁴ Nataraja Guru, Op. Cit., p. 61

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 451

Siddhanta, Tantra, Āgma, Veerasaiva, Śākta etc. In *Bhagavadgītā*, it is explained that “man of disciplined mind, who moves among the objects of sense, with the senses under control and free from attachment and aversion, he attains purity of spirit.”¹⁶ We can see that the very same idea is explained with pungent words by the Guru in *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*- verse 8.

“Eating of the five fruits such as light and so on
Perched on a short- gun foul-smelling, ever in wily changeful
sport,
Such, the birds of five, in shreds, what can bring down,
Wielding such a lucid form, let the inner self brilliant become.”¹⁷

Influence of *Śaivasiddhanta* on the Guru can be seen in *Advaita Deepika*. In Śaivism, after liberation the *Jīvanmukta* may act as if he were in bondage for some more time. It takes some period to realize what is ‘real’ and ‘not real’. In Advaita the moment after liberation the *Jīvanmukta* is free from all these bondages.

“Though, in a state of positive understanding,
the world should be dissolved and lost,
It would still continue as given to the senses
and perceived as before,
To one who regained his space-bearing- once
confused or lost

¹⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, Op. Cit., p. 126

¹⁷ Nataraja Guru, Op. Cit., p. 477

The wrong directions would persist for a long
time to seem the same,
The world is not over there as a vinty,
everything, however,
In a wisdom-cancelled state, looms as before,
Even when one is conceived, without any doubt,
That there is no water in a mirage, it is
still seen as before.”¹⁸

In *Darshanamala* the Guru makes a classification of those who attained *Nirvaṇa* as four: *Brahmavid*, *Brahmavidvaran*, *Brahmavidvariyan* and *Brahmavidvariṣṭan*. This classification may be based on the above said Saivasiddhanta principles. Tiruvalluvar and Tirumular are two of the Guru's other important sources according to Swamy John Spiers - one of the well-known disciples of the Guru.

According to Nataraja Guru, another important source of his inspiration is what he derived from his own *tapas* (mystical discipline). Guru's one of the important philosophical works, *Darśanamālā*, which is also a product of both inner experience and confirmation from outer textual sources is the best example that strengthens the above view of Nataraja Guru.

Thus we can say that the echoes of concepts found in the Vedās, The Upanishads and the *Gītā* are found in the poems of the Guru. But

¹⁸ Nataraja Guru, Op. Cit., p. 151

the Guru came across this truth in his own characteristic way. Buddhism and other Nāstika Darśanas, Aryan Scriptures and ancient dravidian Culture, Christianity and Islam influenced him very much. "Along with all these he also imbibed the rationalism of his age of science. Thus the Guru and his thoughts were moulded by the rich legacy of spiritual and secular speculations the species has so far evolved."¹⁹

2.IV METHODOLOGY

According to Fred Hass the general rule or the principle of Guruhood is "All absolutist Gurus tread the Middle path."²⁰ Narayana Guru was no exception to this general rule. One of the most difficult things for an absolutist guru to do is to relate himself and his teaching to the relativistic society around him- Narayana Guru had succeeded in this.

The Guru was a teacher by the wisdom of the Absolute. Like all the Gurus of mankind he used poetry as a means to sing the wonders of the Absolute. The Guru was always relisent in speech. He was a philosopher who could assert himself in the assembly of the best scholars; one who brought original and striking ideas to interpret the subtle conceptions of the Hindu philosophy. He had his characteristic method of driving home to the hearer in the simplest and quickest

¹⁹ K. Sreenivasan, Op. Cit., p. 125

²⁰ Fred Hass, *The Importance of the Guru*. (Banglore: Gurukula Publishing House, 1965) p. 690

possible manner, the high ideals of the ancients. He liked private philosophical discussions with select scholars who were earnest in their search for truth. But philosophy always remained in the substrata of his life and work.

“Instead of approaching the problems of human misery and happiness at the outside, his method was to come to grips with it from within, through the mind to the self. According to him only central self-knowledge and self- certainty can really solve the innumerable outer problems, and always on a common or scientific global basis universally true.”²¹

Except during his years of penance in Marutvamala the Guru was peripatetic. The Guru seldom remained in the same place for long and wherever he went, he met the common people; and conversed with them and taught them by examples. He conversed with all and sundry to know and to share with a keen and subtle sense of humour. Like Aristotle the Guru was a charming conversationalist.

But most of the time he taught through silence and the Guru-role becomes most effective. His aim was to feel the problems of the people and thereby note the vital solutions to those problems. The Guru put simple straight forward questions and elicited intelligent answers so as to make the questioner think that it is possible for him to get his own

²¹ John Spiers, *The Guru*. (Karnataka: Visranti Munishthanam) p. 10

answers. The Guru's words, with sympathy and love, produced in the listener the feeling of meeting truth face to face.

"The Guru philosophy is not argumentative or polemical in its approach to its problems. It has a simplified way suited to its higher critical as well as intuitive speculation on contemplative values. It is full of precise definitions or definite intuitive personal experiences of the mystic contemplative."²²

"Guru-philosophy is critically convincing by the mere bringing together of the visible and the intelligible aspects. This is the secret of the methodology of the Guru."²³ It necessarily presupposes an absolutist epistemology of its own which is inseparable from it. Thus there are axiomatic and demonstrable aspects; and to these, the final regulative requirement that any truth to be true must also have that of being of value significance in human life, is added. These three factors required for scientific certitude of any vision of truth is sufficiently guaranteed in the works of Guru. His way is to take the disciple by the hand and lead him upward step by step. The idea that the guess-work is primarily meant to be an aid to the contemplative aspirant in self-knowledge rather than a regular text book on subject, is rich in Guru-philosophy proper.

²² Nataraja Guru, *The Philosophy of a Guru - Values*. (Bangalore: Gurukula Publishing House, 1965) p. 693

²³ *ibid.*, p. 694

The Guru sustained contemplation and yoga. The Guru was of the opinion that people need yogic education in order to abolish the troubles caused by spiritual ignorance. A life based on inner spiritual truth or unitive principles could alone ensure universal welfare, justice and happiness.

The Guru came across his truth in his own characteristic way and he insisted on a wise philosophical attitude to life, which he said was essential for success in any field. According to him "to be in the world and work for the world, it is necessary to have the spirit of dedication, courage and discrimination of the real from the unreal." Through philosophy one can obtain the wisdom so essential for acquiring these capacities. The philosophical works of the Guru- *Ātmōpadeśa Śatakam* and *Darsānamālā* give us a brief exposition of the Advaita philosophy based on the essential identity of life.

The method used in *Ātmōpadeśa Śatakam* is that the two counter parts involved in the wisdom teaching situation are brought more unitively together instead of being in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and a pupil. The Guru linked up the essence of the Hindu philosophy, the laws of spiritual life as manifested in Christ, and the principles of brotherhood as the basis of social order which we find in Islam; and utilised for the emancipation of a large population and to reconstruct the social and religious system. The Guru connects all these principles into an intelligent plan which should serve as the ideal of the

future civilisation and employs the principles so conceived for the solution of world problems as they presented themselves to him. Nataraja Guru says “the strict academic treatment is not repeated by the Guru in *Atmōpadeśa Śatakam*. In the very first verse he is content to present his contemplative mystical experiences with either definition or critical analysis of topics, in a manner of thinking aloud rather than in the style required for convincing any opponent.”²⁴

Several items of methodological and epistemological importance in Guru philosophy are common to Vedānta in general. Nataraja Guru was of the opinion that in common with Vedantic methodology, Guru philosophy bypasses the usual piece-meal instruments of reasoning in favour of overall ones of a truly philosophical order. And some of the peculiarities of such a methodology which presupposes its own epistemology can be studied under the heads of:-

- “ i. Non-being as negative something (*abhāva*)
- ii. Primacy of effect over cause (*sat-kāraṇa*)
- iii. Primacy of material cause over incidental or efficient cause (*upādāna*)
- iv. The dialectical relation (*ubhayālinga*)
- v. Admitting the principle of indeterminism (*anirvachanīya*)
- vi. Treating immanent and transcendent as belonging to a homogeneous epistemologically neutral context. (*samānādhikāranatva*)

²⁴ ibid., p. 694

vii. Viewing reality without subject, object and meaning disjunctly (ie. without accepting *tripuṭi*) and

Viii. Including value as a final regulative reference for fact or truth as the third with the *asti* (existing) and *bahati* as looming in consciousness. This is the same as viewing the complete, the Absolute as having existence, subsistence and value (as *Sat, Chit, Ānanda.*)²⁵

The modes operandi of the Guru's mission and ministry started at Aruvippuram in 1888, was to attack the social taboos and superstitions by making use of the conventional rituals and rites. He had poignant tactics in solving problems. He was against confrontation and so frontal attack was avoided. The point to be noted is that he never raised his voice against the awful atrocities committed by the higher castes on the lower castes because he realised that the abominable caste system is due to superstition and not because of any caste or individual. "What he chose to do was to side-track this issue with a view to exposing its gross inequality. With his sense of humour he turned his tables on his adversaries, without giving room for anger and bitterness. His, however, was not a kind of Gandhian non-violence. He did not approve of *sathyagraha*, as he thought it involved exploitation of sentiment and use of moral coercion. His was a tactful exposure of a misuse or misconception. By focussing on the 'irrationality of the issue, he helped

²⁵ ibid., p. 696

eason to prevail. This was the method he adopted even in the case of religious reforms."²⁶

2.V GURU'S TEACHINGS

The Guru's philosophy is the foundation of all his activities and messages throughout his life. Like Sankaracharya, the Guru has given us a careful re-expression of Vedic thought with special reference to the sayings in The *Gītā*. The Upanishads stress the path of *jñāna*, the *Gītā* lays emphasis on all the four paths- *Karma Yoga*, *Bhakthi Yoga*, *Rāja Yoga* and *Jñāna Yoga*. According to Sankara, Advaita (non-dualism) is the acme of vedic philosophy. "Sree Narayana Guru repeats this assertion and in the very process of that repetition extends it and almost repeats it. For that matter, this technique of creative repetition has been the chief characteristic of Hinduism from the Vedas down to the present day."²⁷

The Guru shows us the vedantic way of understanding. It is the great philosophical poem, *Ātmōpadeśa Śatakam*, repeatedly tells us that mere knowledge is not enough. We have to experience and practice what we are told. Through this work the Guru intended to make one realise again and again that the comprehender of Vedānta does not mean a man who grasps the verbal meaning of the lines, but one who

²⁶ K. Sreenivasan, Op. Cit., p. 46-47

²⁷ Moorkoth Kunhappa, Op. cit., p. 69

After his enlightenment and self-realisation the Guru gave major stress on life-ennobling action. He reduced his vision to simple aphorisms statements and sayings in order to enthuse, strengthen and uphold the common people in their moments of crisis and in their struggle for survival. This was a unique attitude and approach of the Guru. Nataraja Guru stated that "He emphasised only two platforms of thought. One was that of every day world of facts and the other that which belonged to the Reality beyond. He carefully avoided preaching or lending his assent to special philosophies or standpoints to serve temporary or temporal purposes, lest such creations should continue to haunt the mind of the ignorant after the creed had ceased to serve an immediate cause, and they add to the heavy load of superstitions with which the poor people confused their honest brains."²⁸

On his 64th birthday the Guru had emphatically declared: "liquor is poison, brew not, nor vend it. The taper's body stinks, cloths stink, his home stinks and whatever he touches stinks." So the liquor business should be wound up.

These were harmful not only to the morals but also to the community's progress as a whole, besides bringing dishonour to it. This declaration was a sweeping indictment, which was considered as a brave and bold act.

²⁸ Nataraja Guru, *The Word of the Guru*. (Ernakulam: Paico Publishing, 1968) p. 40

According to Sree Narayana Guru we have to confront life in all its aspects. "All mankind has to be responsive to true spiritual realisation by living in amity, good fellowship and love, free from all antagonism of race, nationality, creed or caste. This has to be done in the name of the one Supreme Being who is *Śāntam* (calm, tranquil), *Śivam* (auspicious), *Advaitam* (one). That is the understanding, which produces the same result as in the case of an excited visionary who realises cosmic truths. The two processes are one. Practice it and you will actually experience, even when you cannot understand it through reasoning, how spirituality penetrates all activity."²⁹ Here the Guru emphasised the view that there are both a theory and a corresponding way of life that cannot be divided.

Guru's teachings are not to be sought primarily in the words, spoken or written, but in his life and methods of work. "The underlying principles of his life and methods of work are the moral and the spiritual identity of the individuals as well as the communities life and growth based on the oneness of all life, the identity of the laws which govern it, and the Supreme Unity of purpose. He puts these principles in the simple motto: One caste, One religion, One God."³⁰

The Guru led a holy life of *Vedāntin* who gives importance to the principle of unity, solidarity in practical life and to supreme synthesis, which is the goal of philosophical idealism. His advaitic vision was being

²⁹ Moorkoth Kunhappa, Op. Cit., p. 70

³⁰ Swami Dharma Theerthan, *A Prophet of Piece or Sree Narayana Guru of Malabar*. (Trivandrum: City Press, 1933) p. 111

translated every minute of his life into the fields that were beneficial to his fellowmen. He combined serenity of inner life with a rare capacity to turn out a large amount of useful work for the people with whom he came into contact. The guru's advaitism was not confined to the perceptual world alone. While he seemed to agree with Sankara in his arguments in favour of the supreme intellectual monism, his divergence with his teacher became more marked when it came to applied Vedanta. The advaitism of the Guru did not stop with Religion. It came down to more concrete levels of human life and relations. His teachings echoed through the years after his *samādhi*.

The teachings of Sree Narayana Guru is important because of its dynamism, its mobility, leading inevitably to harmony and heightened consciousness. His life was a continuous quest, he refused to stagnate not only in action but also in thought. His life was a saga of persistent exploration and a related cycle of action. He was a *Jñāna Yogi*, Karma Yogi and *Bakti Yogi* rolled in to one.

As one aptly said, "If we follow the simple and peaceful teachings of Sree Narayana Guru we can avert many of our problems. Complete faith in Sree Narayana Guru will help us to bring unity amongst us, amongst the numerous communities in India as well as amongst the different people of the world. Guru's life and teachings will be a beacon

to generations yet unborn. They are worthy of study and emulation by those who aspire to serve the cause of human happiness.”³¹

2.VI GURU'S WRITINGS

‘In placing the science of the Absolute at the disposal of humanity Narayana Guru stands completely alone in the field of wisdom and philosophy, in our time. It is for this reason that he is worthy of honour and veneration’.³²

Sree Narayana Guru was a poet of extraordinary skill and his poetry, which spanned a whole time, falls into three distinct groups: Devotional, Ethical and Spiritual.

2.VI.1 DEVOTIONAL POEM

As a devotee living as a searcher for truth, he wrote many devotional songs, which were in the form of prayers and hymns. They were written in connection with the installation of particular deities. The Guru used a ‘mythological language’ of his own, as it was inevitable as part of the socio-religious necessity of the world in which he lived. In some poems the Guru is adoring the *Ishta Devata* to obtain strength of mind and steadfastness to console the desolate spirit “*Vināyakashtakam*”, “*Guhāshtakam*”(Both in Sanskrit) and “*Shanmughadasakam*” (in Malayalam) are some of the poems written

³¹ K. Sreenivasan, Op. Cit., p. 198

³² Nataraja Guru, *The Philosophy of a Guru*. Values. Op. Cit., p. 713

during this period. He had composed many devotional hymns in Tamil, Malayalam and Sanskrit. Among his works in Tamil only a portion of a hymn has been recovered.

Devotional poems can be categorised as hymns on Vinayaka or Ganapathi, Vishnu, Siva, Devi – the mother goddess and Subrahmanya. “*Sri Vasudeva Ashtakam*”(in Sanskrit-eight verses), “*Vishnu Ashtakam*” (in Sanskrit-eight verses), “*Sri Krishnashtakam*” (in Malayalam – eight verses) and “*Sri Krishnadarsanam*” are some of the devotional hymns on Vishnu.

“*Ardhanareeswarasthavam*.” (in Malayalam), “*Cidambara-shtakam*”(in Sanskrit), “*Śivasatakam*”(in Malayalam – one hundred verses), “*Śiva Prasada Panchakam*”(in Malayalam – five verses) are some of the devotional hymns on Siva.

Some of the hymns on Devi are “*Bhadrakālī Ashtakam*” (in Sanskrit – eight verses), “*Devi Pranama Ashtakam*”(in Sanskrit – eight verses), “*Devisthavam*” (in Malayalam).

“*Bahuleyashtakam*” (in Sanskrit – eight verses), “*Guhashtakam*” (in Sanskrit- eight verses), “*Shaṇmukha Dasakam*” (in Malayalam), “*Subrahmanya Stuti* (in Malayalam – Sixty verses) are some of the poems on Subrahmanya.

2.VI.2 ETHICAL POEMS

During the period 1887 to 1914 the Guru had composed many ethical poems against the prevailing social taboos – untouchability,

During the period 1887 to 1914 the Guru had composed many ethical poems against the prevailing social taboos – untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability. Some of them are “*Jāti-Lakshana*” (in Malayalam), “*Jāti Nirnayam*” (Critique of caste – five verses) and “*Jīva kārunya Panchakam*” (in Malayalam – five verses on kindness to life).

In his five verses “*Jīva Karunya Panchakam*” the Guru states that:

‘The non-killing vow is great indeed

And greater still, non-eating to observe

And in all, should we not say, O men of righteousness

Even to this amounts the essence of all religion’? ³³

All religions stress the importance of universal brotherhood and advocates kindness to all living being. The commandment ‘Thou shall not kill’, which Christianity and Islam inherited, confirms this view. The very same idea is explained in *Bhagavadgītā*–VI 32

Even as he desired good to himself, he desired good to all. He embraces all things in God, leads men to divine life and acts in the world with the power of spirit and in that luminous consciousness. “He harms no creature ... As he sees God in the world, he fears nothing but embraces all in the equality of the vision of the self”³⁴

All religious life pre-supposes kindness as the Guru explicitly states his “*Jīva Kārunya Panchakam*” (Kindness of life)

³³ Nataraja Guru, *Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru*. Op. Cit., p. 314

³⁴ S. Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavadgītā*. Op. Cit., p. 205

In such a light how can we take life,
And devoid of least pity go on to eat'?³⁵

In this work the Guru poignantly explains that kindness is the basis of religion, piety and kindness together constitute an important article of faith. By doing so he is applying the axiom of the Advaitic non-dual reality of the self.

"The self is universal and unitive and therefore cannot countenance conflict between life and life. This is the first corollary arising out of the pure contemplation of a priori truth. When it is accepted that killing is wrong, the same holds good a fortiori with the question of eating. Kindness emerges naturally as the argument of the second degree which partakes of the logic of emotions to at least an equal measure as it is itself based on pure reason. To the Advaitins one is as valid as the other since the principle involved is the same."³⁶

2.VI.3 SPIRITUAL POEMS

As a *tapaswin* who attains the ultimate stage of a Yogin, the Guru wrote two of his seminal pieces – *Ātmopadeśa Satakam*- in Malayalam and *Darśanamālā* in Sanskrit. The subject of the work entitled *Ātmōpadeśāsatakam* is contemplative self-realisation or knowing oneself, which is the dynamic style of the Upanisads. The teachings contained therein centre around the absolute value called Self or the

³⁵ Nataraja Guru, *Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru*. Op. Cit., p. 314
³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 316

Ātman and not any deity. It is simple, direct and in aphoristic form but symbolic and profound like the Upanishads. In *Darśanamālā* the Guru gives us an overall epistemology and a unifying scheme of correlation by which all schools of thought can be assigned their legitimate place in the general scheme of human understanding. The two works may be considered as the magnum opus of the Guru.

As a grand religious intellectual who had a keen sense of the people and of their social needs, the Guru wrote some best short poems like *Janani Navaratna Manjari* (A Bouquet of nine Gems to Mother), *Brahmavidya Panchakam* (Five Verses on the science of the Absolute), *Asramam* and *Homa-Mantras*. The two poems, which stand by themselves are *Kundalini Pattu* (song of *kundalini* snake) and *Daivadasakam* (Ten verses to God).

In *Kundalini Pattu* the Guru explains that under suitable attitudes and spiritual disciplines known to Yoga, the coiled up 'snake' at the base of the vertebral column is capable of uncoiling itself and roused up. This serpent power then reaches higher and higher levels touching somewhere at the base of the brain. This is the centre of the thousand petalled Lotus (*Sahasrasa Padma*) of the full radiance of positive wisdom. Guru says that this is like the burrow of a snake and when the snake reaches this home it is lost inside it and all 'becoming' is absorbed finally in 'being'. Here the snake symbolizes the soul or self in its progress and we can see how poignantly the Guru dovetailed the lines

of the poem into a context of self-knowledge. This theme of '*Kundalini*' can be seen in the poem of Mahatma Kabir Das who made mystic poems about Raja Yoga and Hata Yoga.

Daiva Daśakam is the 'Prayer to God' in ten simple musical verses in which all the grand concepts of Indian Philosophy are epitomised. This prayer in Malayalam was composed at the request of some disciple who wanted a prayer suitable for all -young or old, simple or learned irrespective of their religion. Narayana Guru therefore treated the concept of God in its universal numinous context as the absolute factor.

Through his writings the Guru presented the *Advaita* Philosophy for practical application in modern life as a remedy for the many ills that modern man is heir to.